DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 478 092 IR 058 686

AUTHOR	Megaridis, Crystal S.
TITLE	Homing in on Our Customers: How the Praxair Information Resource Center Reevaluated and Implemented a New Marketing Strategy.
PUB DATE	2002-06-00
NOTE	7p.; In: SLA 2002: Putting Knowledge to Work. Papers Presented at the Special Libraries Association Conference (Los Angeles, California, June 9-12, 2002); see IR 058 674.
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.sla.org/content/Events/conference/2002annual/ confpap2002/papers2002conf.cfm/ .
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Information Centers; *Information Services; *Marketing; *Special Libraries; Use Studies; *User Needs (Information)

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Work request statistics have been tracked at the Praxair Information Resource Center (IRC) for nearly a decade. After a gradual and steady increase of work requests over the years, the work requested of the IRC reached a plateau in 1999 that lasted approximately 1 year. Work request statistics during the winter of 2000, however, indicated a shift away from the utilization of the IRC. Concerned about this change, the IRC set out to evaluate the situation. Results from a survey of customer information habits, as well as focus group meetings, provided the IRC with important information that pointed to several possible reasons for the change in usage. The IRC chose to embrace these findings, and shifted gears slightly, in order to be in closer alignment with the true information needs of the patrons. The IRC began a long-term marketing campaign in July of 2001 that revolved around a combination of a significant increase in IRC departmental visibility and more individual, personalized communication. Monthly events sponsored by the department, new IRC "ads", and a more proactive approach were all part of the new marketing strategy. Statistics continue to be monitored and a follow-up survey will be administered during the first quarter of 2002. Results of the campaign will be evaluated in the spring of 2002. (Author/MES)

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ED 478 092

Homing in on our Customers: How the Praxair Information Resource Center Reevaluated and Implemented a New Marketing Strategy

Crystal S. Megaridis, MALIS
Manager, Information Resource Center
Praxair, Inc., Burr Ridge, IL 60521
Crystal_Megaridis@praxair.com

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ABSTRACT

Work request statistics have been tracked at the Praxair Information Resource Center (IRC) for nearly a decade. After a gradual and steady increase of work requests over the years, the work requested of the IRC reached a plateau in 1999 that lasted approximately one year. Work request statistics during the winter of 2000, however, indicated a shift away from the utilization of the IRC. Concerned about this change, the IRC set out to evaluate the situation. Results from a survey of customer information habits, as well as focus group meetings, provided the IRC with important information that pointed to several possible reasons for the change in usage. The IRC chose to embrace these findings, and shifted gears slightly, in order to be in closer alignment with the true information needs of the sci-tech patrons. Marketing the right services to the right people in a way that would reach them and be of value to them became essential.

The IRC began a long-term marketing campaign, using both new tactics and honing the tried and true methods. The basic premise of the new marketing techniques revolved around a combination of a significant increase in IRC departmental visibility and more individual, personalized communication. Monthly events sponsored by the department, new IRC "ads", and a more proactive approach were all part of the new marketing strategy.

In July of 2001, the IRC began the new marketing campaign. Statistics continue to be monitored and a follow-up survey will be administered during the first quarter of 2002. Results of the campaign will be evaluated in the Spring of 2002.

BACKGROUND

With annual sales of $5.1 billion, Praxair, Inc. (NYSE:PX) is a global, Fortune 500, company that supplies atmospheric, process and specialty gases, high-performance coatings, and

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related services and technologies. The company also designs, engineers and constructs cryogenic and non-cryogenic supply systems.

Prior to 1996, the Praxair library was primarily a function supported by and devoted to the organization's Research and Development department. The year 1996 brought many changes, including placing the library function under Praxair's General Services department with an expanded corporate-wide customer base. Hence, the Praxair Information Resource Center (IRC) was born. From 1996 through 1998, IRC services expanded, marketing to different business units took place, and the IRC staff grew to meet the needs of the expanded user base. The Praxair IRC currently has libraries at two facilities in the US and serves approximately 1000 internal customers, with a potential customer base of 23,300 employees worldwide.

Statistics over the years have shown a steady increase of both library usage and work requests. Most notable was an increase early in 1999, with the integration of a previously separate library into the IRC. For approximately the next 18 months, the IRC experienced a relatively stable number of work requests. In the Fall of 2000, a few months of slightly lower user statistics were followed by a lower-than-usual December. In early 2001 usage statistics were still somewhat lower than usual. This prompted interest in determining why this change in usage might have occurred.

INVESTIGATION

In early Spring 2001 the IRC began an assessment to determine what may have happened. This included the distribution of surveys to both users and non-users; a more in-depth review of IRC usage patterns; meetings with focus groups; and a review of company activities that could be affecting IRC usage. This review uncovered several interesting pieces of information that revealed why the customer usage pattern had changed.

Surveys were distributed to employees who may or may not have been IRC users. A fabulous survey return rate of 90% was attributed to the fact that the IRC tied completion of a survey to receiving a giveaway item. Survey questions were targeted to the information habits of the employees, with questions such as, "Do you prefer doing information searching yourself or having someone searching for you?" and, "What types of information do you use?". A fill-in-the-blank question asking, "What information sources are you using and how is it delivered?" was also provided. The responses to this question were most insightful. This survey pointed to two key pieces of information. First, 75% of the respondents prefer to search themselves, and more than 50% of respondents use the Internet as their primary source of information.

Further analysis of IRC user statistics showed that roughly 80% of our work requests by 1999 - 2000 were generated from R&D departments, while only about 60% were from R&D during the Fall of 2000 and into Spring 2001. This indicated that a change in usage occurred directly related to R&D.

A focus group meeting with several R&D employees who regularly use the IRC also brought to the forefront the need to have more individual contact. The group expressed their frustrations in not knowing all the IRC resources and services available, and feeling distant from

the hub of the IRC. It was clear that we had not nurtured the R&D portion of our customer base over the past few years.

Starting in December 2000, Praxair allowed open Internet access at the desktop level, which made an impact on the IRC services. Previous to the open access policy, the company allowed only a small percentage of employees to have desktop access to the Internet. To help employees without access, the IRC provided computers with Internet access within the IRC libraries for the employees to use. While the IRC had always been pro-access for all employees, this change has had a substantial effect on the IRC usage. Not only did the IRC lose those frequent users of the Internet terminals, but now all employees had the Internet at their disposal 24/7. While we all know the Internet is extremely limited in its information and searching capabilities, many non-information professionals believe that all information can be found there.

In this review, we also took into consideration the fact that we had recently made access to our electronic journals available to our R&D groups. One of our information specialists had created an easy-to-use spreadsheet with a list of the links to the electronic journals to which we subscribe. A simple tool such as this clearly could impact our document acquisition workload.

Other factors beyond the control of the IRC during the course of 2001 also played a part in its usage. For example, one of Praxair's large R&D locations announced in the Spring of 2001 it would close at the end of that year. Several of the IRC's customers were affected by this action, either relocating or leaving the company altogether. In addition, Praxair had roughly a 4% layoff in the Fall of 2001, whereby many of the IRC's regular customers from departments across the board were dismissed.

FINDINGS

The above exercises identified several areas where the IRC could better support customers, particularly the R&D customers. We grouped these findings into two categories: those the IRC can change and those that are beyond our control, but that the IRC needs to adapt to as they arise (such as layoffs, facility closures, etc.).

The IRC staff has a wide and varied skill set to use to assist Praxair employees. While we tend to think of an information center's primary role as finding and providing information, equally important, and to some extent even more important in the view some of our customers, is providing access and guidance for information retrieval. This rang clear and true from the results of the surveys and focus groups, especially from those working in the technical areas who are "pre-wired" for research. In other words, many of the Praxair R&D staff have an inner drive to dig deep for answers, which is a major reason why they want to use desktop tools themselves, as opposed to asking for searches done by the IRC.

ACTION PLAN

Areas that the IRC could address immediately included: providing better communication about the IRC's capabilities, including more personalized communication; supplying useful desktop searching tools; offering information and training for Internet use.

The staff of the IRC worked together to generate ideas for addressing these issues. The basic premise of the plan was to have more frequent contact with our customers and position the IRC as a proactive group with expertise and leadership in information work. To address these issues in a coordinated fashion, the IRC revised existing marketing tools and implemented new marketing and communication tools. These were designed to provide the IRC with feedback to help us stay on track in meeting the customer's needs.

Existing Marketing Tools

The existing IRC brochure was in hardcopy and distributed in new hire orientation packets and at new hire orientation sessions. An electronic brochure was created with easy links to Lotus Notes databases and other electronic IRC resources. This enabled the IRC to get the word out to a much broader audience, and it was easier to control revisions. This new format brochure was also edited to emphasize the capabilities the IRC offers that better reflect the needs of the customers. This brochure was distributed in mass e-mailings and was also used as a guide for orientation sessions.

Previously, the IRC held new hire orientation sessions quarterly at one facility and on an as-needed basis at the other. Orientation sessions are now scheduled monthly at both facilities, and are announced in such a way as to encourage all employees to attend, not just new employees, as past notifications may have implied. In addition, the IRC proactively contacted small groups and departments and presented customized orientations sessions focused on the specific information needs of each group. These had been well received.

Surveys were revised and distributed more frequently. In addition, they were mailed directly from the IRC manager as opposed to being sent from the generic IRC mailbox. We experienced a significant increase in the response rate when the surveys were sent from an identified individual. We are careful not to send surveys to the same person more than once per year.

New Marketing Tools

The IRC staff spent time brainstorming to create a motto that describes the IRC's role. While we spent hours debating, refining, and wordsmithing, the exercise turned out to be extremely beneficial for our group, as we all came away from the sessions with a better understanding of who we are, what we do, and how we bring value to the corporation. Our motto, "The IRC: Praxair's Source for Information" is now included on all documents we generate for our customers. It is our hope that the motto will help our customers understand us better as well.

The IRC created new "advertisements" which were inserted into the bottom of each e-mail sent out to our customers. We changed the ad every two weeks. Examples of ads include, "Did you know the IRC produces two Newsletters? Cybrarian's Newsletter and the IRC News can be viewed in the Lotus Notes database called IRC Newsletters." Another example is: " The IRC maintains a Notes database called Process Improvement Tool Library. It contains hundreds

of valuable tools which can be useful to you, your work group or team projects." We continue to run these little ads so as to remind our customers of the services we provide, as well as use this communication tool as a way to introduce services that employees may not be aware of.

In response to the desire for more end-user searching from the R&D groups, the IRC hosted a Dialog Vendor Day in July of 2001. Advertised to all business units at one of our facilities, this event was extremely well attended due in part, no doubt, by the drawing held for a PDA. Not surprisingly, the majority of attendees and those who eventually signed up for a DialogSelect password were from the R&D groups. Training, both on-site and via telephone had been conducted, and product updates were also provided to those who have IDs. We subsequently and successfully rolled out the Dialog Company Profiles product to some of Praxair's other business units. We organized another vendor day at second Praxair location in March 2002.

As part of the IRC's plan to "get the word out" and to address the issue of the Internet being used as a primary source for information, the IRC began a Fall Series Internet lunch & learn program in August 2001. They are informal and held at a time that is convenient for most people. The IRC had taken the lead to become the local authority on using the Internet. Topics ranged from using search engines to discovering the hidden web, to evaluating sites and information on the web. These had been well received, and one session was actually repeated as there was so much interest .We decided to continue on with a Winter Series. Other employees with Internet experience volunteered to make future presentations as well, and we decided to continue these on a monthly basis indefinitely. The IRC also makes use of these sessions by asking attendees to complete surveys and to provide us with Internet topics they would like to see presented in the future.

Annually the IRC weeds the library collections and offers the discarded library materials to employees. Unlike other years when these materials were left on the book trucks for general perusal, the IRC held a Book Giveaway this year. A large conference room was reserved and the materials were organized attractively. Turn out was great, many books were taken, and this simple activity helped to project a friendly face on the IRC.

The IRC site on Praxair's Intranet was launched in March 2002 and was the fruition of nearly 12 months of interdepartmental work. The IRC had carefully organized our resources and services in an easy-to-use format for the web, which was our next step in bringing the IRC closer to our customer base. The IRC on the Intranet contains a complete directory of all the IRC resources and services at one single location on the Intranet. We anticipate this will greatly further our ability to "get the word out" about the IRC.

RESULTS

Results of these efforts have been wonderful, but far from expected! Initially, we had thought that by promoting the IRC in these ways that usage statistics would increase significantly. Instead of seeing a change in numbers of work requests, we experienced increased visibility, respect and a shift in the services that we provided. The IRC is as busy as ever, but the type of work we do now is less related to answering specific information questions, as in the

past, but now is more focused on serving different needs of the customers. We are educating the customers in using the desktop tools and making sure they know when to ask for assistance from the IRC, which greatly helps the customers help themselves. Unlike typical work requests, many of these services and the value they provide are not quantifiable.

CONCLUSION

It has been approximately one year since we began this exercise, but it is far from over. Marketing our services to the R&D segment of our customer base, as well as the total customer base, needs constant reassessment. Marketing efforts must be based on providing the services that are needed, which can only be accomplished by keeping in sync with the customers changing needs. We also acknowledge the potential impact of the changes that inevitably occur, such as layoffs, mergers, and other unexpected company-wide events. The IRC will continue to evaluate the marketing tools that are in place, as well as consider using others. Our department now has a renewed vigor, now that we have increased our value as "Praxair's Source for Information".

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Much appreciation goes to Praxair IRC staff members L.Yvonne Curry and Vanessa B. Downs for their enthusiasm and valuable input throughout the process. Many thanks also go to Merle Micklin of C. Berger Group, who has provided invaluable insight, and to Maureen Perry of the Dialog Corporation, for her continuous support.

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